

Whittling away at judicial branch is leaving our courts in a fragile state

John Lohrmann and Craig Matheson

What happens when you whittle and whittle on a piece of wood? After a while, the wood where you have been cutting becomes so fragile that it is in danger of breaking. That is what is happening to our judicial branch of government.

Several years back, judges were dismayed to learn that Washington state was dead last – 50th out of 50 states – for the money the state spent on our trial courts. At that time, the entire judicial branch received only three-tenths of one percent of the state operating budget.

To its credit, the Legislature responsibly decided to start on the long road to provide adequate and stable funding for our trial courts. The percentage went up to seven-tenth of one percent.

Unfortunately, Washington remained in last place, 50th out of 50 states. Judges were excited, however, that the Legislature was finally doing something to right this wrong.

Now, even that modest progress is in danger of disappearing under devastating cuts proposed in the Senate budget for the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the judicial branch's state agency that exists largely to support the trial courts.

The Senate budget proposes a cut of \$7.9 million, supposedly the same 5 percent cut that executive branches are facing.

The House budget treats the judicial branch better, but it would cut \$12 million from truancy funding to keep kids in school and help families with at-risk children.

Nationally, 75 percent of state inmates and 59 percent of federal inmates are high school dropouts.

Either the state provides money to keep these children in school, or we will deal with them later in our criminal justice system or in prisons.

If the Senate budget is adopted for the judicial branch, the cuts would actually result in a 31.2 percent cut to the AOC in this year alone and a 43 percent reduction to AOC since 2009. This is more than any executive branch of the state has faced. The great majority of the AOC's budget — 64% — is either constitutionally protected or protected by the Legislature through provisos.

As a consequence, the cuts have to come entirely from the other 36 percent of the AOC budget, drastically cutting into core, essential services.

Some of the funding destined to disappear if the Senate budget passes includes funding for supervisors for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA).

CASAs are local community volunteers who serve as guardians ad litem to represent the best interests of children who have been removed from their homes due to allegations of abuse or neglect.

The guardians ad litem are mandated by statute. Cutting funding to CASA programs would be foolish since using volunteers significantly leverages scarce public funding. Otherwise, a more expensive attorney would have to be appointed at county expense. The cuts would put other court needs in danger.

This includes:

Court interpreters appointed for those who cannot understand English and would not otherwise know what is happening in court.

A contribution to the salaries of district and qualifying municipal court judges. Funding for staff for county clerk's offices to collect legal financial obligations, something that has brought millions of dollars to the state and the counties.

Washington's judicial branch – a coequal branch of government – deserves better. Our kids deserve better.

The constant whittling away at the judicial branch's budget is leaving our courts in a fragile state, one that is danger of breaking, just as that piece of wood will break eventually. Urge your state legislators to restore funding to the trial courts – now!

John Lohrmann is a Superior Court Judge in Walla Walla County. Craig Matheson is a Superior Court judge in Benton and Franklin Counties.